

Spy case brings sea change in US-Israel ties

By Joseph C. Hirsch

This past week has witnessed a strange phenomenon. United States relations with America's most generously supported client, Israel, were more ruffled on the surface than those with its great rival and adversary, the Soviet Union.

Soviet-US relations are still in the post-Geneva euphoria of assuming that things are going to get easier rather than worse. Word was leaked that negotiations over a possible Soviet withdrawal of armed forces from Afghanistan are progressing and just might succeed, though that still seems unlikely.

But with Israel, something like a sea change has taken place in the wake of the arrest of Jonathan Pollard on a charge of spying for Israel. An American investigating team was in Israel this past week interviewing Israeli intelligence officials. The Americans were not only seeking full knowledge of Pollard's activities, and recovery of classified US documents that Israel had obtained from him. The team was also probing around wherever it could to try to identify all members of Israel's covert-intelligence and technology-gathering apparatus in the US.

In a parallel operation at home, American federal officers armed with search warrants were examining the records of three US companies. They were trying to find out whether, as suspected, the three companies had been illegally sending Israel both technology and equipment for a special process of making better cannons for tanks. Last May, another US company had been indicted for improperly sending Israel devices that could trigger nuclear weapons.

At the Pentagon, CIA, State Department, and National Security Council, routine relations with Israeli intelligence officers were suspended while procedures for tightening security went into effect.

One "high official" was quoted in the New York Times as saying that "an official who conveys classified information to Israel without formal authorization is committing espionage, even if he does it without pay." The same official was quoted as saying that "any individual who sees Israeli and US interests as parallel is dead wrong."

The indications are that a general policing of relations with Israeli officials is going on, and that from now on breaches of

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Security for Israel's benefit will be dealt with as severely as they would be if any other foreign country were involved.

Various government officials have informed this writer that the unauthorized passing of classified material to Israeli agents has been frequent and usually left unpunished in the past. The word seems to have gone around that this must be stopped.

Meanwhile, a further change was taking place in the military balance in the Middle East.

Syria mounted more and new types of antiaircraft missiles along its borders with Lebanon and Syria and took delivery of several new fast-attack ships from the Soviets. The identity of the ships was not disclosed in the official Syrian announcement, but they were believed to be four ships of the Natuchka II class. These are described as corvettes and are known to carry several surface-to-surface missiles.

Israel withdrew its ground forces from Lebanon on June 10 of this year, but has continued ever since to patrol both Lebanon airspace and the Lebanon coast. Syria is openly aiming to build to military equality with Israel. The process seems to be well under way.

Here is a subject calling urgently for consultation between Washington and Moscow. Israel expects the US to keep Israel's military strength up to a level at which it could handle the armed forces of all of its Arab neighbors. Israel, in fact, has enjoyed that level of military superiority in its area ever since the 1967 war when it defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in a mere six days of battle.

If Syria is expecting Moscow to give it military equality with Israel, then Israel will want Washington to provide a major increase in Israel's military power.

Can such an arms race be headed off by an agreement between Washington and Moscow? The subject is no doubt one of those under discussion between Soviet and American diplomats in their "regional" meetings. It will be most interesting to see whether anything comes of any such talk.

Meanwhile, the US has persuaded Syria to withdraw some of its new Soviet antiaircraft missiles from inside Lebanon, but not from inside Syria along the border with Lebanon and Israel.

As matters stood this past week, Syria could presumably strike down any Israeli aircraft flying over Lebanon from weapons based inside Syria. In other words, Israel no longer can fly reconnaissance over Lebanon without Syria's tacit consent.

Not enough details about Syria's growing sea power are yet available to permit a measure of the relative strength of Syria's versus Israel's naval forces. Presumably, Israel is still well ahead. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Israel has six corvettes, 24 fast-attack crafts, and 45 coastal patrol boats; Syria has two frigates, 22 fast-attack craft, and seven coastal patrol boats. If the latest additions are, in fact, the four Namuchka IIs that have been on order since 1981, then these plus the existing two Petya-class frigates might be a match for Israel's six corvettes.

Israel's ability to dominate Lebanon by sea and air is definitely under challenge. And this is happening at a time when official Washington is annoyed over Israeli spying in the US and when serious efforts are being made inside the federal establishment to clamp down on Israel's previous freedom to take unauthorized material at will.